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Komure Family: Kathryn "Katy" Komure (Elder)

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STOCKTONSpeaks!

KATHRYN “KATY” KOMURE

Since she was a young girl in French Camp, Kathryn “Katy” Komure found her life defined by work. Despite a constant struggle to reach her goals, things had a way of working out for Katy because of her own perseverance. She focused on what she thought important and discovered she could succeed despite societal barriers which stood in her way.

Her father came to Clements, California when he was 17. His uncle had called him to come from Hiroshima, Japan to become a laborer. After he arrived, he worked in the railroad camps. In time, he wished for a wife, someone from his home country. As was the custom among the Japanese, the young bachelor’s family contacted a “middle-man” to arrange for a girl from Japan. The young woman who was originally promised to be his wife got cold feet, and her sister was sent in her place, instead. The substitute bride became Katy’s mother.

The couple settled in French Camp, California to start their family, working together on a small farm. Katy was the middle of their three children. Her father also did truck farming on the side while her mother cared for the children. As the children grew, they were expected to work as hard as the adults. They would prepare the crops that were eventually taken to the produce market to sell. There was a constant stream of different vegetables to be cleaned and placed in the truck. It was hard and heavy work, with long hours, most months of the year..

In addition to hard labor, Katy, her brother, and her sister went to school. One of things that set Katy’s mother apart from most Japanese immigrants was the formal education she had received in Japan. Most girls were simply married as soon as they were ready. Katy’s mother, however, had the chance to get a full education before marrying. She in turn instilled the importance of education in her three children.

Katy attended French Camp Grammar School from kindergarten to eighth grade. She also attended Sunday School at a Christian church, where the lessons of living a righteous, morally correct life reinforced the messages she received from her parents.

After school, there was two hours of Japanese Language School, where Katy, her brother and her sister studiedr their native language. Ensuring that their children spoke Japanese properly was so important to their parents that they paid for formal lessons and gave their children plenty of practice—Japanese was only language the family spoke at home. (One of the unintended consequences of this emphasis on speaking Japanese is that Katy, likemany of her peers, had difficulty mastering English grammar and all of its intricacies. Thus, many “Nisei”, or second generation Japanese, with similar language experiences had to take “bone head” English as college freshman if, in fact, they were lucky enough to go to college.) As a result of school, Japanese classes and her numerous responsibilities, Katy never had time to participate in sports or community events. When she and her siblings finished school, there was always work waiting for them at home.

Experiences that Katy had when she was seven years old significantly influenced her outlook on life and expectations of herself. That year, her maternal grandfather became seriously ill, and Katy’s mother was called to return to Japan to care for him. The entire family scrimped and saved to afford the ocean passage. The trip itself took three weeks. Once their mother left, the children were expected to care for themselves. Their aunt was the “overseer” of the family. Despite the children’s best efforts at performing all the household chores on their own, their aunt was not satisfied and chastised them for not doing a good enough job. This experience helped Katy to know the high standard that was expected of her. By the time her mother returned to the U.S. almost five months later, Katy felt very independent.

During her mother’s absence, Katy’s father was in the home but never intervened in the aunt’s supervision of the household. Katy remembers that her father never showed much affection for her. She knew that he loved her, and was often reminded of this through the simple facial expressions he made. Still, he never told Katy of his love. Katy came to understand that his reticence was part of the upbringing of his generation.

When Katy reached fourteen, a middle-man was found to arrange a marriage for her, following Japanese practice. Katy was not pleased at this turn of events. Not only did she decline the marriage, but she also suddenly acquired an immense dislike for boys and young men. With no interest in boys, and considering the demands of her workload at home and her need to master the English language, Katy invested her time and

efforts in school. A dream of becoming a nurse gave her the focus she needed to succeed in her education and plan for an escape from the hardships her family and others around her endured.

Following Japanese custom of favoring male children, Katy's older brother got preference over the other two children, both daughters. He therefore was provided with family funds for college-- to attend dental school--, leaving Katy and her sister without financial support for higher education despite their mother's emphasis on education.

While school was difficult academically and socially, her experiences there helped steer Katy in the direction she wanted to go. Her upbringing made her strong enough to overcome all the obstacles that society would throw at her. Therefore, despite burdens both financial and linguistic, after high school Katy chose to enroll in a nursing program across the fields from her home at San Joaquin General Hospital. She was one of three Asian-Americans who were invited to enroll..

The Second World War intervened while Katy was a student nurse. At the age of eighteen, she and her family were taken to the Turlock Assembly Center as part of the government-ordered relocation of Japanese-Americans in California and the West Coast. They were one of the first families to be placed in the internment camps, after initially being housed in a horse stable. Ultimately they were relocated to Arizona. To add to the misery of being uprooted from their home, the family contracted San Joaquin Valley fever, a lung infection common only in such dry and hot areas as the San Joaquin Valley and Arizona. The internment experience left a memory that is still painful today—one that Katy seldom mentions.

To continue her studies away from the West Coast, Katy applied to many nursing programs, but the number that would consider a Japanese student were small. Montana was the first state to send her an acceptance letter. Though Lewiston, Montana, was a town without racial minorities she decided to go. Her family and others who had to remain in the internment camp feared for her life in the outside society, but she bravely pursued her dream.

After Katy completed her program, she served as a U.S. Army cadet nurse stationed in Utah, while fellow white graduates were sent to coastal regions like Seattle.

Though Katy's family was finally allowed to leave the camp and return home after the war, discrimination against Japanese-Americans continued. Among her relatives and friends, there was a feeling of hopelessness and oppression. Many felt as if they did not belong in the United States, even though they had been born here. There was even animosity in Japan towards Japanese-Americans. It seemed as if no matter where they were, Katy and her family were fated to be outcasts. The unrelenting struggle to overcome these difficulties is a story the family has always preferred to suppress.

But Katy marshalled her emotional resources and returned to school to complete her college training in nursing. She received an A.A. in nursing from San Joaquin Delta College and, two years later, earned a B.S. in nursing from University of California Medical School, San Francisco. Her life, then, was all that she had wanted it to be! She had fulfilled her dream of what an adult should and could become.

In later years, Katy was able to be more open and comfortable about her Japanese heritage. She continues traditions such as singing Japanese songs and making rice cakes before the New Year and strives to instill those beliefs in her children and grandchildren. She knows that it is easier for them to achieve their goals, but pushes them to work just as hard as she did. "Be honest, try to reach your highest potential" is what she tells them all.

Katy has always worked hard and even began studying for a master's degree, which she did not complete for financial reasons. Ultimately, each challenge in her life has given her new strength. She believes that what helped her come of age was her combination of early experiences and her constant striving towards her goals.

Her heritage has also been her teacher. She learned from the experiences and the sacrifices of her elders, as they pursued their dreams—and now, Katy Komure is passing that same wisdom on to new generations, including her own children and grandchildren.

Author: Jacob Lethbridge

Interviewer: Jessica Hernandez

Ethnic Group: Japanese-American

Generation: Elder